

New ECO program will get students out of classroom, into nature

By Sherry Brunson
Apopka Chief Staff

The folks at the Wekiva-Middle St. Johns-Tomoka Marsh Aquatic Preserves are passionate about the natural beauty that surrounds the Wekiva Wild and Scenic River System and they work hard to preserve it. Their passion has translated into a desire to share those resources with others, who may not know about the beauty in their own backyard, and enable them to experience it for themselves. As a result, they have created the Wekiva ECO (Environmental Curriculum Outreach) program for local school groups.

The first school to sign up for the program is Piedmont Lakes Middle School. During the program, 300 students from the school - 100-125 students per day - will attend an all-day program that will feature five different nature stations manned by senior park biologists, park rangers and guides and interpreters from the Wekiva Wilderness Trust. There will be one teacher or chaperone for each 10 students. The students will be divided into groups of 20 students.

"The park offers countless educational opportunities

for visits by groups of all ages to learn about the history, geography, ecology and environment of the area," said Virginia Oros, Wild and Scenic River Ambassador with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. "The park is in every sense a living classroom and the ideal place for students to learn firsthand what the environment is all about and the role they have in helping to protect and preserve it."

Oros said visits by school groups are encouraged and welcomed. They also qualify for free admission.

"In the 40 years since the park gates opened, tens of thousands of school children have enjoyed an educational and fun visit to the park," Oros said. "A tailor-made itinerary can be provided to suit a group's particular needs. Last year more than 33,000 people visited the park's nature center which is run by the Wekiva Wilderness Trust (WWT), the not-for-profit citizens' support group that supports the work of the park."

Oros, who has a BA degree from the University of Florida in special education, has volunteered approximately 1,000 hours as a member of the WWT and is on the technical advisory team for the Friends of the



The programs set up by the Wekiva Wilderness Trust (WWT) will feature five different nature stations manned by biologists, rangers and guides.

Florida aquifer and watershed; different habitats and wildfire; identifying animal tracks and so on. If a class is studying a particular subject, we can probably tailor a program to include various elements of it.

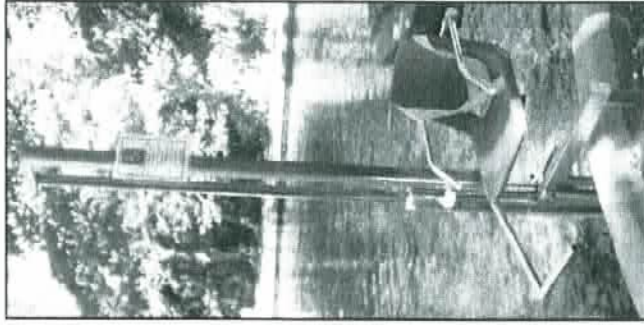
"Despite the water environment, the area is very safe. There has never been a serious accident in the spring or surrounding area," Oros said. "Rangers, trained in first aid, are on duty at all times and a visit to the park poses no threat at all. The park has plentiful restroom facilities, and pavilions and picnic areas for lunch. Recreational opportunities include walking, swimming, canoeing and kayaking, and all of these can be incorporated into

programs for what would be a very memorable day in the park."

The parks, which cover more than 41,000 acres and provide a natural corridor for wildlife extending all the way north to the Ocala National Forest, include Wekiwa Springs State Park (WSSP), Rock Springs Run State Reserve (RSRSR), and Lower Wekiwa River Preserve State Park (LWRPSP).

The parks, collectively known as the Wekiwa River Basin State Parks (WRBSP), are located in Lake, Orange, and Seminole Counties, approximately 20 miles northwest of Orlando.

"The Wekiwa River Basin State Parks are important not



Park workers will use nature as a living classroom.

only because they are a magnificent natural oasis in a heavily developed urban area, but because they display 19 distinct natural habitats, more than any other state park in Florida," Oros said. "It is a second magnitude spring that pumps out 43 million gallons of fresh water every day (the equivalent of 11,000 Olympic-size swimming pools), and plays an important role in the hydrology of the region."



Scientists, Wekiwa River ambassador to teach about turtles and more

Wekiwa Wild and Scenic River ambassador Virginia Cross, Wekiwa River Aquatic Preserve, Wekiwa Springs State Park, Wekiwa Wilderness Trust, and Turtle Survival Alliance will host three opportunities over to become acquainted with the neighboring Wekiwa wilderness on Saturday, March 30, at 10:30 a.m. at 1800 Wekiwa Circle, Apopka.

Participants will meet under a tent near the spring in the state park.

The event will feature:

* **Turtles of the Wekiwa Wild and Scenic River Presentation** with Dr. Brian Hauge, Eric Munsch, and other volunteers from the North American Freshwater Turtle Research Group and the Turtle Survival Alliance will have live turtles on display for

a 90-minute discussion on individual species. Participants will learn about the natural history of the species living in the Wekiwa River, the turtle study they have been conducting here for 14 years, and what you can do to help protect turtles at Wekiwa Springs and all over the world.

* **Guided tour of the Nature Center** will feature a live alligator, snakes, and turtles. Participants

will learn interesting facts about these and other species. There are also fossils and artifacts that illustrate the area's rich history. The exhibits will give you an idea of the abundance of wildlife and history found within the Wekiwa Basin. Participants also will learn about Wekiwa's rich diversity of flora and fauna, some of which is endangered or threatened. (Begins at noon)

* **Guided Wet to Dry Trail Hike** will take about 40-45 minutes and is suitable for all ages as the trail follows the elevated boardwalk through a tree-shaded hammock. The group will meet at the Nature Center then walk down to the scenic bridge atop the Wekiwa Spring Pool that offers a view of the Wekiwa Lagoon. Participants will go back in time and learn about the geology and hy-

drology of Wekiwa Springs, the prehistoric mega-fauna that used to roam here and the first settlers who arrived about 12,000 years ago. Your expert guide will also talk about the many and diverse animals and plants that you will see along the way. (Begins at 12:30 p.m.)

For more information, call 407-330-6727 or email Virginia Cross@dep.state.fl.us



Work on area rivers is a labor of love for Virginia Oros

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The Florida Department of Environmental Protection is responsible for the Wekiiva River, Rock Springs Run, the Lower Wekiiva River and the Middle St. Johns River has dedicated staff members who are willing to cut corners because they are passionate about what they do. Because of the economy, budgets have been pared down significantly and they were a bit short-staffed, but fortunately a National Park Service grant gave them the opportunity to hire Virginia Oros, whose job as the 'Wild and Scenic River Ambassador' has been a labor of love.

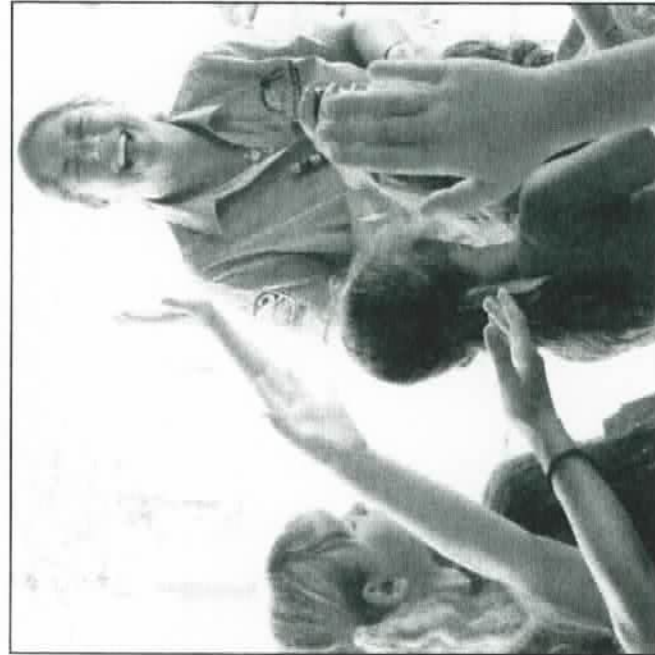
"The Wekiiva River has been designated a 'Wild and Scenic River' and the Friends of the Wekiiva River (FOWR) received a grant from the National Park Service to hire a river ambassador," said Debo-

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Oros has adapted her eco-class topics and time constraints so it may be presented to civic groups, landscapers and families.

She also has worked with a team of turtle researchers that come to the river twice a year, and is currently working with other agencies in an effort to develop an interactive interpretive water trail on Blackwater Creek. In the future, she will teach water canoe safety training for volunteers.



Virginia Oros enjoys a moment with a group of youngsters during one of her classes held at Wekiiva Springs State Park in Apopka.

hammock and how our conservation areas and park lands play an important role in our state and three different groundwater

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For more information about Wekiiva Springs State Park, visit www.floridastateparks.org/wekiwasprings.

—SHELLY SHEPHERD, WEKIWA-MIDDLE ST.

Johns-Tomoka Marsh Aquatic Preserve Manager for the DEP. “The FOWR committee responsible asked that the DEP administer the three-page contract, which was just renewed for another year in August.”

Oros, who can quickly become passionate about her subject, had the perfect qualifications for the job, Shelley said. She has a bachelor of arts degree from the University of Florida in special education and is quite adept around boats.

In the past, Oros and her husband — as members of the Wekiwa Wilderness Trust and on the technical advisory team for the Friends of the Wekiwa River — have logged more than 1,000 hours as volunteers in the area as campground hosts at Wekiwa Springs State Park in Apopka.

Although she has only been on the job approximately 15 months, Oros hasn’t let grass grow under her feet. Just listening to the number of programs she has both initiated and participated in this year is enough to wear out a strong man.

One of the programs she created is a new pilot program designed to bring public school students for an environmental educational day to Wekiwa Springs State Park. The first group to take advantage of the program was the sixth graders

—SHELLY SHEPHERD, WEKIWA-MIDDLE ST.

The program consists of five different learning stations that break down the class size to a manageable 20 students per station.

The first station is a guided tour, by a WWT volunteer, of the Wekiwa Wilderness Trust Nature Center, which exhibits the history and animals of the park. At the second station, volunteer April Doggett taught “Anatomy of a Spring,” which used a special Eavisston groundwater simulator to teach about groundwater — where it comes from and how it exits through the spring. Paul Philpott, WWT president, led the third station, which features a walk on the park’s “Wet to Dry Trail” showing the different ecosystem habitats from the wetlands to the sand hill vegetation area.

The Florida Forest Service taught “Ecosystem Restoration” at the fourth station, which includes the purpose and importance of prescribed burns in public lands and parks. They actually demonstrated the techniques used to begin a prescribed burn to the students.

At the fifth station, assistant Park Manager Amy Conyers and Park Biologist Paul Lamundo treated the students to an “Upland Tour via Tram” down the main drive discussing the various flora and fauna habitats including sand hill and

Students visited each station for approximately 35-40 minutes.

The cost for the program is free, but the students were asked to contribute funds for transportation costs.

“We will be looking for other schools and organizations within the tri-county area, Orange, Seminole and Lake, to participate in this program,” Oros said.

The eco-program was a branch-off from a class Oros taught to 636 students and 195 adults at Camp Wekiwa during the summer months.

“Over the summer months, I taught nature classes on ‘Anatomy of a Spring,’” Oros said. “I presented the program on groundwater and surface water recharge and how pollution can enter into our canals, lakes, streams and rivers to the campers and volunteers at Camp Wekiwa, which is sponsored by the Florida Federation of Garden Clubs and the Park. I had such a good response from this summer program that I decided I would like to branch out so more students can have an opportunity to learn in this living outdoor classroom.”

Oros said WSSP has specific land that they manage and the river runs through it: CAMA/Wekiwa River Aquatic Preserve is responsible for the water column and submerged lands. All these entities are part

Oros also regularly traverses the river to talk with others about conservation and the effects of litter.

“One of the things I always tell people is the importance of cutting up the plastic loops that come on a six-pack and the loop that is around a container of milk,” she said. “We have a photo of a bird that died after getting tangled in the plastic. I also tell the kids not to let helium-filled balloons go up into the air. I remind them that what goes up — must come down. We also have a photo of a bird that almost died after thinking a rib-

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